[Published by Special Arrangement.]

# POOR FRILLERS

By

PERCY WHITE.



CHAPTER I.

"The Cartrew Comedy Company," which also made valiant excursions into light opera and burlesque, was unknown to metropolitan fame. Recruited, for the most part, from the ranks of the stage-struck who were not absolute failures, this much harassed little band of comedians "toured" through those second and third rate provincial towns which are just outside the range of the more important traveling theatrical companies. For instance, they captivated audiences at Bognor and Worthing, leaving Brighton and Eastborne untouched, unless an engagement was offered them on the Pier. Still, as all the members of the company were young and sanguine, except Ferdinand Cartrew, whence its name was derived, neither the scantiest audiences nor the most dismal barn which ever usurped the title of "Theater Royal" could damp the ardor of the artists, as they loved to call themselves.

The youngest and least experienced member of the company was Althea Vernon, whose real name was Emily Parker. She was tall, slight, fair-haired, blue-eyed, but if her prettiness was of the orthodox type, her temperament was less impractical than her physical endowments suggested. Her father owned a small draper's shop in the west of England, and she had "gone on the stage" in the usual way and for the usual reason. She believed that she had talent (an illusion countenanced by her friends), but was not convinced of it. Her plunge in "the profession," in fact, was experimental. If it did not bring well-paid success it might lead, she argued, to a good marriage. Althea believed that she was taking her gifts to the best market, and the romantic literature with which she was acquainted encouraged the idea.

The failure of the company was Frillers, whose stage name, Herbert Stanley, no one recognized. He had been a clerk, and when at last he realized that as "an artiste" he was, as Cartrew declared, "impossible," he became a melancholy pessimist and the manager's secretary at a salary of 30s a week—usually unpaid. This gloom and his good nature made him known as "poor Frillers." All Cartrew's dirty work devolved on Frillers, and when "the treasury" was empty, and Cartrew seeking consolation in some adjacent barparlor, the whole company clamored to the "secretary" for their week's salary.

Frillers was fond of Miss Vernon, but as a failure he kept his affection to nimself, although it was not concealed from the company generally. He fetched and carried for her, got her the best dressing room whenever it was possible to filch it from "the leading lady," and invariably found her lodgings. The members of the company said, "Poor Frillers is most devoted!" Then they laughed and usually added, "But a lot she cares!" Frillers, however, considered Miss Vernon was "the best-bred and least ungrateful lady of the company," and when at Christmas time she presented him with two new neckties from a parcel of millinery and haberdashery which her father had sent her he considered that he was more than repaid. For is not love's service too often love's only reward? Epigrammatic tags of this sort danced before Friller's mind and comforted him.

One wet afternoon in October the Cartrew Comedy Company arrived at Eastbeacon, a moldy old town in an eastern county. Like the company, the town was "out at elbows." The population had become too small for the town, which had a past recorded in the local guide books, and a mediaeval crumbling Tudor structure, known as the Guild Hall, where "entertainments" were occasionally given. It was in this encouraging histrionic center that the Cartrew Comedy Company descended to play the well-known farcical comedy of "Little Johnnie," as the dripping bills on the walls of the deserted tannery announced "for one night only."

The train was late, and the company reached the Guild Hall in a bad temper, a couple of hours before the performance. Cartrew swore helplessly. The skimpy scenery refused to adjust itself to the narrow stage. He swore and shouted for Frillers. "Where's that confounded fellow?" he asked.

When he learned that his secretary had taken Miss Vernon's baggage to her lodgings his wrath increased, and he observed that Frillers "wasn't paid to act as Miss Vernon's footman." The company almost smiled, in spite of its dejection, when Frillers appeared on the stage in time to hear this offensive statement.

Whilst Cartrew went to make up as Little Johnnie, Frillers worked with the carpenters till some vague and dusty scenic order emrged from the chaos.

Miss Vincent called him. "I don't know what on earth to do, Mr. Frillers," said she, plaintively; "the rain's coming into my room."

Then Frilers hurried up a dark and illodorous passage to the rescue.

"You might have got me something better than this," she complained, opening a worm-eaten door leading to a fetid cupboard, where the tallow candle threatened to set light to the shelf above it, and a cracked mirror leered paralytically at the plaster peeling from the damp walls.

"'Tis damp," he admitted.

"Damp!" she retorted. "It isn't fit for chickens. And who can 'make up' with such a glass as that?"

"Never mind," said Frillers, "I'll see what I can do."

Then he hurried down the narrow, creaking stairs, and returned with a hand mirror, snatched from the table of the leading lady, and several pieces of brown paper, which he pinned over the reeking walls.

"That's all I can do at present," he said apologetically, "and lucky it is for one night."

But Miss Vernon was too deeply occupied with her rouge to thank him.

A quarter of an hour later Frillers glanced dismally from behind the curtain at the thinnest "house" to which even the Cartrew Comedy Company had ever played. In the front seats, priced at two shillings, a few young ladies in sailor hats, accompanied by young men, were scattered over the benches, but the gaps between the couples only made the sense of emptiness more oppressive. In the shilling places were a couple of dozen cheerless townspeople, nursing wet umbrellas, while, at the far end of the hall, a score or so of country lads were cracking nuts and exchanging banter in the rustic local dialect.

"There's not five pounds in the house!" sighed Frillers, as he came to the end of his mental arithmetic.

The other members of the company also realized the thinness of the harvest, and thought with bitterness of their unpaid salaries. But the orchestra (two violins, a piano and a cornet) plunged recklessly into the comic airs of the year before last, and the play began.

"What an audience! what an audience!" exclaimed Cartrew, when he came off the stage. "There isn't a laugh in it. High-class acting's completely thrown away on the dismal chaw-bacons. They might as well be under chloroform! Just go round to the front, Frillers, and see if you can't wake 'em up a bit!"

Frillers obeyed, and when, a few minutes later, Miss Vincent appeared on the stage as the pretty comic housemaid, with a doll's broom, a solitary outburst of applause flashed from the darkest corner of the sixpenny seats.

"It's that ass, Frillers!" said the Cartrew Comedy Company.

But in spite of the appreciation and desperate laughter of Frillers, the Cockney hilarity of "Little Johnnie" was lost on the wits of Eastbeacon. The Cartrew Comedy Company was accustomed to failures, but not to such complete failures, and when the play was over and Frillers tried to comfort them by the assurance that the audience had enjoyed "Little Johnnie" as much as they were capable of enjoying anything the company refused to be comforted. "It was," all insisted, "Cartrew's confounded mismanagement — and how about salaries to-morrow?"

"I'm not the treasury," said the melancholy Frillers. "Besides, if it's empty nothing can come out of it!"

But when Miss Vincent took him aside and protested that she must have the thirty pieces of silver which were her due on the grounds that she was "stoney broke," Frillers said he would see what he could do.

He found Cartrew sullenly counting silver in the little kennel dignified by the name of the box office, by the light of a naked and hissing gas jet.

"What's the row now?" asked the manager.

"I wish you would let me have Miss Vincent's salary," said Frillers, "it's 30 shillings; she's 'stoney broke.'"

"She's no stonier than the rest of 'em," said Cartrew. "I'll pay the company off to-morrow at 12. The engagement at Shelford-on-Sea has fallen through. The pierhead's been washed away—or something."

Then Frillers withdrew to the stage door, where Miss Vincent was waiting.

"Can't get him to do anything," said Frillers. "Says he'll pay the company off to-morrow."

"Oh, dear, what shall I do?" cried Miss Vincent, beginning to weep helplessly.

"Don't, don't!" cried Frillers. "You shall have it. I'll get it out of him somehow, only dont' do that!"

He hurried off desperately to Cartrew, whose faculty of original abuse he somewhat dreaded. This time the box office was empty, but the hissing gas jet shone on the cash box and the bunch of keys in the lock. Cartrew was standing with the custodian of the Guild Hall on the steps in the falling rain. They were discussing some matter with warmth.

Frillers, unseen, stole into the little box office, opened the cash box noiselessly and took a sovereign and a half from a meager pile of gold. "It is next thing to prigging," he thought, "but it's for her, and it is hers."

Hurrying back to the stage entrance he heard Cartrew protesting angrily that it "wasn't in the agreement, and 'dashed' if he was going to pay for it."

The rest of the company were gone. Miss Vincent was standing dejectedly on the threshold watching the rain splashing in the puddles of the street. When Frillers said "Here's your money, Miss Vincent," she exclaimed, "'Pon my word, Mr. Frillers, you're a dear, good fellow!" Her gratitude had never been so warm before. "What," she asked, "did Ferdie say?"

The manager was known as Ferdie in the company.

"Nothing," said Frillers.

"He must have," she insisted. "Surely he swore at you?"

"No; he will do that to-morrow. He was having a row about the gas or something, and I took the money on my own authority—as secretary, you know."

"Mr. Frillers!" exclaimed Miss Vincent, aghast. "Why, you'll be 'fired out' when he knows."

"I'll take my chance of that. You wanted your money, and you've got it."

This conversation took place whilst they were walking to Miss Vincent's lodging.

"Well," said Miss Vincent, "if there's a row I'll stand by you. Good-night, Mr. Frillers, and thank you."

The next morning at 12 o'clock, when the company assembled at the Guild Hall, the manager was absent. He had left the following letter for Frillers: "Inform the company that I have been compelled to go to London on urgent business. Their salaries will be forwarded to them at their private addresses at the earliest opportunity."

The announcement produced dismay. The whole company spoke at once, and when they had recovered their presence of mind they abused Frillers for not preventing the catastrophe.

"It is your duty as secretary to have prevented this," said the leading lady.

But the company was left stranded and there was nothing to be done. To some of them the situation was not novel. There was nothing to do but to return to London. Those who had "put by" lent those who were destitute the necessary funds. Anger kept up their energies. The meeker spirits who had homes to go to decided to return to domesticity; of these Miss Vincent was one. Frillers accompanied her to the station, and bought for her with his last half-crown two sixpenny illustrated papers. He was now facing the world with eighteenpence, and the romantic element within him thrilled in doubtful joy.

Everything was ready. His parcels ranged in the rack, the luggage in the van. It was a damp, chilly day; in his worn suit of blue serge Frillers, standing at her side, looked more like "Poor Frillers" than ever. Too much absorbed in her own troubles, Miss Vincent had not much time to think of him. Suddenly a sense of his forlornness dawned on her. He looked thinner. There was something in him which touched her, "and what will you do, Mr. Frillers?" she asked.

"I think I shall go up to London to-morrow."

"But have you enough money?" she asked, timidly.

"Plenty," said he, proudly. "I received a remittance this morning."

"Are you sure?"

"Quite, thanks, Miss Vincent."

Her look of pity hurt him.

The guard approached to close the door; Miss Vincent took the corner seat which Frillers had secured for her.

"Good-bye, Mr. Frillers," she said, "and thank you for all your kindness."

They shook hands.

"Good-bye, Miss Vincent."

He felt a deep longing to say something dashing, heroic, inspiring, but faintness for want of food and the sense of wasted affections kept him to the commonplace. He loved, despaired and was anhungered all at once. Still he raised his soddened straw hat to her as she looked pitying on him from the carriage window, not without a dash of theatrical and fate-defying jauntiness. Then the train rolled out of the station and a great tear appeared in Friller's eye.

But hunger was for the moment stronger than sorrow. When the train disappeared behind the cutting he entered the refreshment room, drank a glass of beer and ate a Bath bun, although he felt that the bun, with its sugary top, gave a grotesque and ridiculous note to a situation otherwise not deficient in dramatic completeness.

The next step Frillers decided must be an heroic one. Eastbeacon is a military depot; the great, straggling barracks were a few minutes' walk from the station. It was thither that Mr. Cartrew's secretary stole.

Before the barracks a short, square-faced man in uniform and a peaked cap was standing whipping the loose cloth of his right trouser with a cane and keeping a keen eye on loafers. It fell on the hesitating Frillers.

"Thinking of enlisting, sir?" said the sergeant.

The "sir" did it.

"Yes," said Frillers, boldly.

"Come along, then," said the recruiting sergeant.

And the barrack doors closed on Frillers, who felt the winds of strange adventures blowing about his cold red ears.

CHAPTER II.

So Frillers became a soldier; but, as nature had not especially intended him for a military career, he never completely enjoyed her Majesty's service. "Still the discipline must be good for me," he argued, a conviction enabling him even to support the hardships of a troopship in a Biscay gale. For his regiment was ordered to the Cape, where, in the main barracks, he suffered grievously from mosquitoes and vermin unmentionable till the simple comforts of life appeared in his imagination as mighty luxuries.

Frillers was sick of soldiering in South Africa when the regiment was recalled to Gibraltar, and thence, after a tedious eight months, dispatched to Malta, where he rose to the humble rank of orderly corporal, caught an attack of fever, grew homesick for the smell of English country lanes and dewy pastures, and won the heart of the regimental chaplain, who in secret wrote to the poor corporal's father, a not unprosperous Nonconformist minister at Liverpool, suggesting the propriety of purchasing his son's discharge. The chaplain pointed out that throughout his service the young man's conduct had been irreproachable, and hinted that he might even had risen to be a sergeant major, at 5 shillings a day, had not his exceeding good nature swamped his sense of military discipline. The letter represented Corporal Frillers in so attractive a light that the Rev. Theophilus Frillers sent his son funds to purchase his discharge, accompanied by his forgiveness.

"What on earth am I fit for now?" wondered poor Frillers. In his regiment, luckily, his training as a clerk had been of use to him, and in consequence of his excellent character a Liverpool merchant, colonel of volunteers, found him a place in his office at a salary of 35 shillings a week.

For two months Frillers dwelt at home with his father, a widower and an earnest temperance advocate, going regularly to his office. Unfortunately the habits of the barracks and a taste for beer clung to the ex-orderly corporal. He had quarreled with his father six years before on the subject of his theatrical ambitions; a misunderstanding now arose on the question of total abstinence. Frillers's most "piercing aversion" was, as he admitted, "bigotry, the one thing he couldn't tolerate."

One evening he met some comrades and returned to the paternal roof late at night, not drunk, but—imperfectly sober. This incident gave rise to an argument with the Rev. Theophilus, who lost his temper and called his son "a godless, tipsy reprobate!" Once more Frillers's dramatic instincts rounded off the situation dramatically.

It was impossible for the man who had acquired a reputation as the soberest man in his company to submit meekly to such a wrong.

The next morning Frillers, with £5 in his pocket, made his "second dash for liberty."

The restless taint in his blood spurred him to seek fresh adventures. He left his home and his employment, and took the early train to London. That same evening ancient habit sent him to the Strand, where, on the threshold of a popular bar, he met Cartrew, whose glossy hat and big cigar suggested at least transient prosperity.

Cartrew invited him to take refreshment at his expense, and they talked of old times, not forgetting the melancholy day when the company was wrecked at Eastbeacon.

"I paid 'em all off, though," said Cartrew; "in fact, I intended to do so even if they hadn't sued me. I could hear nothing of you, however; so, of course, you never got yours. It's too late now. The odd thing was that when I sent Miss Vincent's screw she returned it to me and said that you had paid her."

Then Frillers confessed.

"It was deuced like a felony," said Cartrew. "I remember my accounts were 20 shillings short. Still, right or wrong, I admire you. 'Twas a generous thing! And what a fine scene it would make! By George! I should like to show 'em the lover robbing the till for the sake of the lady! How I could work it up! How gone you were on that little girl, too, Frillers!"

"I have never forgotten her," said Frillers.

"What! Not in the six years?"

Frillers shook his head, sipped his whisky and soda water sadly and asked what had become of her.

"Well," replied Cartrew, "she's left the profession, for which, by the way, she was almost as unsuited as you, and went into business at a place called Furcombe—somewhere in the west of England. Miss Darlington, leading lady in one of my companies, saw her there a few weeks ago. It appears that she married a man named Pyke, who died. She's now a widow with two kids."

Then Frillers, whom this information had much excited, began to press Cartrew with questions till he became bored, since the only subject which he cared to discuss permanently was himself—his failures, his successes, and the beastly stupidity of the public who never could see a good thing when he offered it.

The conversation, however, made a deep impression on Frillers. Here was his first and only love—a widow with two children, alone in the world—probably helpless! Her helplessness impressed itself on his mind as he recalled how she had wept on the evening when he had raided Cartrew's cashbox.

To see her again, to renew a romance which had never died out of his imagination, seemed necessary to adjust his life to the dramatic stream of circumstance. He had been a soldier for her sake, because soldiering, even in flea-ridden South African barracks, made him "worthier of her." He had been unable to "settle down" since, because her fair head and blue eyes and the other obvious charms of the inevitable popular romance glimmered constantly in his fancy.

As he walked down the Strand and the theaters were emptying he tried to believe that her voice was calling for him; when he fell asleep in a room in Drury lane he had persuaded himself that she yearned for his help and his protection. Thus he built his drama. It did not occur to him that a man whose sole available capital was about £4 might perhaps appear ridiculous as a rescuer. When a dream caught Frillers he let it carry him away, and believed that he was a man of action. He was a leaf for the winds of fancy to sweep down the long, white conventional road made by unoriginal wanderers.

On the following morning, therefore, when he went to Paddington Station, carrying a small black bag, took a third-class single ticket to Furcombe, and said to himself, "My whole life is a romance," he sincerely believed it.

Furcombe is a small west country town, protected on the east by a rugged moorland, green with peat bogs and gray with granite, where the wind is always complaining in the withered reeds and the streams which feed the torrent in steep valley are never still.

It was about 4 o'clock on a lovely afternoon in May when Frillers walked along the broad, sunny streets of Furcombe. Behind him lay the sweep of the great moor, the granite tops of the hills glowing in the blue and gold of the hour. Around him the air was sweet with apple and pear blossom and the breath of the spring.

Standing near the church porch under a chestnut tree, white with blossoms, was a baker carrying a basket of comfortable brown loaves. Him Frillers asked where Mrs. Pyke lived, and learnt that at Furcombe the Pykes were many, but that one Mrs. Pyke, who had a draper's shop, lived in Elm street, "just across the churchyard, out o' the gate yonder."

Frillers, finding a luxurious sense of enjoyment in his search, followed the lad's directions.

Elm street was shaded by a row of tall elms; beyond was a strip of greenest grass, bright with the gold of buttercups; then came the river bank and the murmur of water gliding over rounded bowlders.

It was a street to dream dreams in; not for carrying on "a business," yet several little low-browed houses, swallowed up in the vernal luxuriance of their gardens, boasted shop fronts. Above one of these ran the legend "Pyke, late Parker, Hosier and Draper," behind the narrow panes in the green light filtering through the elm tops was the usual rustic display of ties and collars, straw hats for either sex, and articles of millinery. And then Frillers, remembering that he had posted letters for Miss Vincent addressed to "Mr. Parker, Elm street, Furcombe," grasped the situation.

The beauty of the spring afternoon, the murmur of the river, the dreamful atmosphere of the quiet place seemed to him merely a charming setting to add beauty to the drama in which he moved.

He entered the little shop; the bell rang as the door opened. A fair-haired woman in black advanced to the counter and looked at him.

"Don't you know me?" said he.

Mrs. Pyke started.

"Why, it's Mr. Frillers!" she exclaimed. After a short silence she added, "I often wondered what had become of you. But come into the parlor."

He followed her into the room of which the windows looked into an apple orchard, white with blossom. Here he sat down and told her his adventures, adding only a slight embroidery from his fancy to give it the necessary picturesqueness.

When he had finished she said, "Poor Mr. Frillers! Why, you are no better off than six years ago, when you saw me off at Eastbeacon."

"I am richer by my experience," he replied, feeling that he was about to be flung back on the rocks of disillusion.

"Well! I only hope you'll find a market for it," said Mrs. Pyke, in a practical voice suggesting doubt.

Though her manner was kind, the old melancholy which the impact against reality excited began to descend upon him. Suddenly it seemed to him that he had moved round in a listless circle from the collapse of the Cartrew Comedy Company at Eastbeacon to Mrs. Pyke's shop parlor at Furcombe. The curves touched the Cape, Gibraltar and Malta, and his father's austere house in the repellant Liverpool street.

Mrs. Pyke interpreted his odd dazed look.

"You see," she said, "I've given up all thoughts about 'the profession,' and, being an artist now, I'm in business. We never quite saw things as they were when we were in the Cartrew Comedy Company.